

## Across the Bridge of No Return December 20

On December 22, 1968, after almost exactly 11 months of captivity in North Korea, the crew of the USS *Pueblo* walked across a narrow trestle in the Demilitarized Zone that separated the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from the Republic of Korea. This was where returned prisoners had crossed in an exchange of POWs at the end of the Korean War in 1953; the structure was known as the "Bridge of No Return."

The *Pueblo*, a SIGINT collection platform, had been captured off the coast of North Korea the previous January 23. The crew had been unable to destroy either their equipment or a large collection of classified publications, revealing SIGINT secrets in detail to North Korea.

During nearly one year of captivity, the crew had been badly mistreated, forced to reveal classified information, and exploited for propaganda purposes.



*Bucher walking across the Bridge of No Return, his form partially obscured by somebody waiting to greet him*

The North Koreans had been clear and adamant about the price for returning the crew. At about 0900, the senior U.S. delegate to the continuing armistice negotiations at the "truce village" of Panmunjom signed a false statement admitting that the *Pueblo* had been spying on North Korea in its own territorial waters. Immediately following the signing, General Woodward repudiated the document, telling media representatives it had been signed because it was the only way to get the crew back alive. This verbal statement lacked impact. The *Pueblo's* master, Commander Lloyd Bucher, crossed the bridge first, and verified that all surviving members of his crew made it across successfully. The body of the sole casualty of the ship's

capture, Duane Hodges, was conveyed across the bridge.

The crew members were flown to San Diego so they could spend the holidays with their families. They returned to duty immediately after New Year's for extensive debriefings on the tragic affair.

When the crewmembers returned after nearly a year in captivity, there was criticism among some military and political leaders that they should have done more to resist their captors, and they were criticized for revealing classified information. Those who criticized the crewmembers really had little understanding of their situation and the treatment they had survived.

It seems strange to us today, but not all welcomed the crew back. Many senior U.S. Navy officers had nothing but negative feelings for Commander Bucher and his fellow *Pueblo* officers, and, in many cases, this extended to the rest of crew. The *Pueblo* apparently was the first American ship surrendered to an enemy since the War of 1812, and the fact that it had not fired a shot in its own defense was considered a particularly damning offense.

The NSA Historian was in the U.S. Army in South Korea during this period and recalled: "A few weeks after the ship was captured, I was detailed to the U.S. Eighth Army headquarters in Seoul to work in their G-2 office; due to circumstances, they needed some SIGINT-cleared analysts in a hurry, and I was one of those chosen by the Army Security Agency to help the G-2 out. In the Joint Intelligence Office, I (as an enlisted man) worked alongside primarily field-grade officers.

"In this office I encountered not just a lack of sympathy for the *Pueblo* crew, but downright animosity, particularly on the part of Navy officers. No one I encountered expressed any sympathy for fellow Americans in a terrible plight. In fact, at one point in mid-1968 we received a HUMINT report (which turned out to be entirely false) that the ship's master, LCDR Bucher, had committed suicide in a North Korean prison; I remember distinctly the senior naval officer's one-word response to the report: 'Good!'

“I was still in Korea when the *Pueblo* crew came home. The return was broadcast live on the Armed Forces Television Network. It was real drama watching the men walk back one by one across the Bridge of No Return; in some ways it seemed like a Christmas present to all Americans.”

The NSA Historian has one other memory to add. “When we opened the National Cryptologic Museum in 1994, we were limited to exhibits about events no later than 1945, except the flag from the *Liberty* Incident of 1967. About a year later, we given permission to add a display on the *Pueblo*.

“In preparing for this display, the then-curator, Jack Ingram, and I met with a couple of *Pueblo* survivors from this area. They lent us a prison uniform they had worn on the day of the return. We asked them what thoughts they would like us to convey in the exhibit. One of them spoke right up—‘That is wasn’t our fault.’

“It broke my heart. Jack’s, too.

“The stories of the crew since the return have shown that this terrible experience marked them for life. Still, the stories of how they resisted captors who had complete control over their life or death have been a constant source of inspiration to me since.”

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508 caption: Bucher, in a dark coat walking across a bridge; he is partially obscured by a person waiting to greet him.